

The Lesson of Stringer Bell (or The Importance of Art)

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According to a recent *New Yorker* article, only African Americans and TV critics watch HBO's *The Wire*. If true, that's too bad. For the last four seasons, this TV show has done what very few "cop shows" have done—challenged viewers to consider the real world. Unlike the worlds of *Law and Order* and *CSI*, the "bad" guys in *The Wire* are rarely caught and if so, often unsuccessfully prosecuted. Like the real world, some "cops" and some "robbers" on the HBO show are hard to distinguish from each other and true evil resides only in a very few people. Most people do bad things because they are in bad situations. Some people try to do good things and the system punishes them for it.

Just about every TV cop show and movie reinforces a white middle class prejudice that police can solve every crime and catch every murderer. Such a prejudice puts pressure on real police and prosecutors to fudge the facts and then stubbornly refuse to come clean when the fudging is found out. (The *Innocence Project* has plenty of details on their website). Police and prosecutors fight reforms not so much out of a desire to avoid confronting their own failings but from a need to uphold the legitimacy of the system in the eyes of the middle class. HBO's *The Wire*, however, shows the system warts and all.

One of the warts, actually, is more like a tumor. In the third season of *The Wire*, one of the characters, Stringer Bell, builds up his own illegal drug trade and then manages a syndicate of drug kingpins along business principles that would make any Harvard M.B.A. proud. Bell has mastered the business of drug dealing but he is not satisfied. He wants to invest his millions in creating a legal real estate business. After setting up a legitimate office, Bell attempts to enter the complex and political world of Baltimore real estate development. But his prodigious skills and knowledge are not transferable. After donating the required \$250,000 to a state senator's reelection campaign, Bell doesn't understand why he has yet to get a city or state redevelopment contract. Bell's lawyer explains: "A guy says if you pay him, he can make it rain. You pay him. If and when it rains, he takes the credit. If and when it doesn't, he comes up with reasons for you to pay more. [state senator] Clay Davis rainmade you."

The Bells and Davis' of this world are not bad men (although there are bad men in this world). Bell was born into a world in which he learned to survive and then master. Learning the lessons of one world, however, does not mean you can move into another, even if both worlds involve the same kind of bribery, kickbacks, extortion, lies, and betrayal. Both worlds—politics and drug dealing—have, ironically, fundamental similarities. That is the lesson of Stringer Bell.

That this lesson is compellingly made in *The Wire* demonstrates that good art can capture the realities of our society in a more true and efficient manner than a social scientist, journalist or historian can. Grassroots rap, hip-hop and graffiti artists have always known this. The powers-that-be know this as well, which is why they fight to ration and marginalize art in the public sphere. Successful community activists understand the power of photos, cinema, theater, stories, music, dance and drawing. Art has always been central to social movements and to vibrant communities. So, make revolution—support the local artist of your choice and rent or watch *The Wire*.